



Divine humour

Humour is an attribute of the divine character. In the Bible God laughs at our folly, but he also laughs with us, in spite of our failings and disappointments. Recognising this characteristic deepens our understanding of the nature of God. Humour is thus a legitimate subject for theological consideration.



Cheryl Taylor

Cheryl Taylor is Director of Doctor of Ministry Program and Associate Professor of Practical Theology at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary in Springfield, Missouri. This article is an extract from 'A Theology of Humor', which is available online at www.ag.org/wim/0805/0805_Theology_Humor.cfm and is reproduced here with the author's permission.

A professor of Old Testament remarked one day, 'Class, if you have never seen God smile nor heard him laugh, you do not know him very well.' Indeed, one's understanding of God is unexpectedly expanded by discovering in him — and in ourselves — the attribute of divine humour with its uniting, healing, revelatory and life-affirming powers. In grappling with the ever-existent questions of the natures of God and humanity, a discussion of humour and its most obvious expression, laughter, is a legitimate subject for theological consideration.

It is generally agreed that humour is more than the bare ability to make or perceive jokes. True, it often works through smiling and laughter; and laughter may be produced by and express joy, merriment and amusement. But, it may also be produced by mockery, derision and scorn. Scripture provides examples of both types of humour. Thus, for the purposes of this article, humour generally refers to the capacity for amusement, with all of the varied forms that it may take. This definition is broad enough to include both 'positive' and 'negative' forms.

Humour is a direct reflection of the image of God. We attribute the powers of creativity, thought, feeling, desire, love, hate and will to God, why not the power of mirth? We speak of God suffering, why not laughing? If tragedy gives us insight into God and the nature of humanity, why not comedy? As humanity was endowed with reason, so was it given a bit of the Almighty's sense of humour. Humour is a unique and authentic aspect of human nature which can thereby assist one in a more complete understanding of the nature of God. However, laughter and humour are not always a clear image of God. Much laughter is fallen laughter. It moves in a direction and out

of a spirit that is the opposite of the divine. One must, therefore, be able to clearly distinguish between the kinds of laughter.

To say God has a sense of humour and laughs, is not implying that God has a physical form to make laughter as we know it possible. Rather, his laughter reflects something of the depth of his character. The anthropomorphism of the idea of God, which is obvious in the Hebrew literature, would not be completely described without paying attention to the humorous traits of the picture of God.

In the Bible, God not only laughs *at* us, but also *with* us. He laughs in amusement at our folly, but he also laughs and dances with us in our victories (which are really his victories).

God laughs at us

There is theological significance in the connections between humour and the theme of God's judgment. The careful reader of Scripture is aware that God laughs a lot at human folly. Here is the classical passage: 'Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision' (Ps 2.1–4, RSV).

Here God ridicules idolaters and self-serving people who foolishly arrogate to themselves divine prerogatives. Ignorance and pretensions of absoluteness are often the target of humour's arrows. And God's humour is not

exception; it seems to delight in laying low the haughty, in humiliating the arrogant. God laughs to scorn those who set themselves up as high and mighty kings and who forget that they are only men, creatures answerable to God and to his law. It is as if God cannot help seeing the ridiculous and comical in the revolt and fighting of the helpless creatures who intend to hinder Him in completing his own plans. The point here, then, is that humour in the Bible is clearly iconoclastic, designed to smash pretensions. As such then, wherever and whenever it happens in the world, it may be expressing the hidden, often mysterious judgement of God in our midst.

God laughs at oppression and meanness? At first the idea sounds irreverent. With suffering and evil so rampant, how can a loving God laugh? God laughs, it seems, because God knows how it all turns out in the end. Further, the laughter of God does not come from afar. It does not emanate from One who can safely chortle from a safe distance at another's pain. It comes from One who has also felt the hunger pangs, the hurt of betrayal by friends and the torture's touch.

When it comes to humanity, as important as this kind of laughter is, it is incomplete if it stops at the pride, hypocrisy and idolatry of others. Laughter at the faults and follies of others is only fully justified when one is willing to include oneself in the human comedy. Those without sin are invited to cast the first stone, and those with logs in their eyes are counselled about trying to take splinters out of other people's eyes. Humour is thus able to provide a sense of perspective on one's own life, not just other people's lives.

God laughs with us

The idea of God laughing at us, however, is incomplete. A deeper look at Scripture indicates that God not only laughs at us, but also with us, and this makes all the difference.

God's judgment always prepares the way for his salvation in Scripture. God never destroys just to destroy. And so also God's humour, his laughing, presupposes a larger context. And this is the context within which one must study God's laughing and humour. This wider setting is God's salvation, which expresses his grace. Instead of moving only in the direction of the injustices of life and the follies of others, humour can embrace life and others in spite of failings and disappointments. The element of judgment in humour now passes over into mercy. The laughter of justice has now become the laughter of forgiving grace. He laughs in a manner similar to a parent realising that his son or daughter will make mistakes which he will eventually grow out of. When viewing our foolish rebellion, God is amused, but also hurt. Yet, this amused hurt is balanced by the realistic hope of future change on our part, and this gives his laughter a dimension of love and acceptance.

God knows that the day will come when our ignorance will give way to wisdom and true knowledge. Then will begin the festive joy with him that he had in mind from

the start. It is not really surprising, therefore, that the Christian should laugh and sing; after all, he has a great deal to laugh about.

By dealing with the imprisonment of the human spirit (in the world) by laughter, humour manages to imply that the imprisonment is not definitive, that one day it will overcome. Thus, humour also becomes an index of transcendence — and in this case takes the form of a discreet call to redemption. Faith in God allows one to participate, as it were, in the divine laughter. The first and last word belong to God, and therefore not to death but to life, not to sorrow but joy, not to weeping but laughter. For surely, it is God who has the last laugh. The opposite of joy is not sorrow. It is unbelief.

One's faith in God, through belief on Jesus Christ, brings the nature of the new creation to the forefront. One key element of this is joy. Repeatedly, Christians are exhorted to rejoice in the Lord always. As was seen earlier, the

As humanity was endowed with reason, so was it given a bit of the Almighty's sense of humour

biblical picture sees laughter as simply an expression of joy.

While many do not often think of spiritual matters in humorous terms, it may be wise to do so. Humour comes in handy when dealing with the many idiosyncrasies of the Christian life. The Bible seems to cite laughter as merely the signal of an overall attitude that both embraces life and wryly accepts our creaturely status before the creator. This attitude says that life is a good thing, a gift from God to be used as creatively and positively as possible. This may not bring belly laughs, but it should leave a deep sense of joy and hope. To live authentically is to be true to one's essential nature, and part of humanity's essential nature is to laugh, to see the humorous dimension at the depths of existence. Humour expresses a dimension of consciousness that gives richness, value and dignity to human life, despite the inescapable bonds of human fate.

Conclusion

While it would be wrong to give the impression that humour is a dominant characteristic of the Bible, it is more theologically significant than scholars have usually allowed. Humour is rooted in our Creator, and hence provides for us a reflection of divinity. Thus, humour gains its most basic relevance for theological consideration. The dynamics of humour open up a viable and creative approach to the task of enlarging and revitalising the theological vocation. A proper understanding of divine humour should also have tremendous consequences for Christian life, worship, service and relationship with God.

Bibliography

- Benson, JE, 'The Divine Sense of Humor', *Dialog* 22 (Summer, 1983), pp. 191-7
- Cox, H, 'God's Last Laugh', *Christianity and Crisis* 47 (6 April 1987), pp. 107-108
- Ice, JL, 'Notes Toward a Theology of Humor', *Religion in Life* 42 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 388-400
- Jonsson, J, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament: Illuminated by Parallels in Talmud and Midrash* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1985)
- Metz JB, and J-P Jossua (eds), *Theology of Joy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974)
- Morrice, W, *Joy in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984)
- Pecota, D, 'When God Laughs'. Sermon presented at Northwest College, 19 October 1984
- Radday, YT, and A Brenner (eds), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1990)
- Trueblood, E, *The Humor of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964)